

**Health and Human Services Committee
Confirmation Hearing – Sheri Dawson
February 11, 2016**

**Sheri Dawson
Director, Division of Behavioral Health
Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services**

Good afternoon, Senator Campbell and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Sheri Dawson (S-h-e-r-i D-a-w-s-o-n) and I'm the Director of the Division of Behavioral Health within the Department. I have had the privilege to serve in this capacity since August 13, 2015.

I appreciate being here before the committee today. Over the past months, I've had the opportunity to meet with consumers of behavioral health services and system partners. I am grateful for their expression of ideas, concerns and experiences. In my humble opinion, there truly is no health without behavioral health. One in four people are diagnosed with a mental illness or substance use disorder. These illnesses impact our families, our neighbors, our communities. Twenty-five percent of hospital admissions in Nebraska are related to a behavioral health diagnosis. Half of all lifetime mental illness begins at the average age of 14 and 75 percent by age 24. It is important that we continue to develop a system that provides the opportunity for recovery to those we serve.

I will begin by sharing with you a little about my background and then talk about how I believe we can work together to transition Nebraska's behavioral health system into a national leader.

I am a Registered Nurse. I graduated from the Bryan School of Nursing in Lincoln and earned a Bachelor's of Science Degree from Nebraska Wesleyan University in Health Sciences for Nurses.

I began my career as a staff nurse at the Annie Jeffrey Memorial County Hospital in Osceola, Nebraska. Because of the variety of medical care provided, it was the best experience for a 21 year-old rookie nurse. My husband and I then moved to Texas where I worked as a Nursing Coordinator at Charlton Methodist Hospital in Dallas. The patients I served were dealing with chronic illnesses and many struggled with the life changes presented by their disease. I found myself focused on assisting individuals with their behavioral health issues. A neurologist with whom I worked once commented about the time I took to listen and provide information and guide change with patients and their families. He told me about a new psychiatric hospital in the area and thought it might be a great fit. I took my nursing career from the physical medical arena to behavioral health service provision at Willowbrook Psychiatric Hospital. Here, we served adults and young people who were struggling with mental illness and substance use disorders.

My husband and I returned to Nebraska where I worked in the state hospital system as the Associate Director of Nursing for Nursing In-service and Quality Assurance at the Lincoln Regional Center. I loved the opportunity to shape nursing policy and impact patient care through quality improvement. To grow my leadership skills, I moved to Lincoln General Hospital, now BryanHealth, in 1993. There, I served as the Nurse Manager in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. I was a founder of the Child

Advocacy Team at the hospital and one of eight individuals in Lincoln to develop Lincoln's Child Advocacy Center, which continues its important work serving children and families in crisis.

While raising two daughters. I returned to public service as a Nurse Surveyor/Consultant to what is now the Division of Public Health, Licensing Unit. I surveyed assisted living facilities, mental health centers, and substance abuse treatment centers. My passion for behavioral health care then led to apply for a Program Specialist in the Division of Behavioral Health. Over time I was promoted to the position of Managed Care and QI Administrator, then Administrator of Community-Based Services, Deputy Director, and Acting Director. My education and work experiences have proven to be incredibly valuable and have helped me understand the system from all sides of the behavioral health programs.

As our DHHS teams, including the Division of Behavioral Health, grow together, I understand the complexity and the challenges ahead; yet, I am committed and excited about moving the behavioral health system forward. I cannot recall a better moment in time to be building the public behavioral health system Nebraskans deserve. Where there were barriers to partnerships, there are now discussions and collaborations. To create change, our conversations are about what we "can do", not what we can't. Leadership supports and expects DBH to serve as the chief behavioral health authority. It is a top priority to continue to build and improve partnerships with consumers, providers, and system partners.

Our DBH team is working to integrate operations and build a culture of ownership across the organization, including our central office, the Lincoln Regional Center, Norfolk Regional Center and Hastings Regional Center. Our dedicated employees are busy every year serving 31,000 individuals. We are working with Medicaid on the Heritage Health initiative which will integrate physical and behavioral health and pharmacy services, as well as with other DHHS divisions since we serve some of the same individuals. We also collaborate with Corrections, Probation, the six Behavioral Health Regions, provider organizations, consumer organizations, individuals and families who have lived experience with mental illness and substance use disorders. We look forward to carrying out the 2016 strategic plan as we conduct a larger behavioral health system needs assessment. The assessment will provide a data informed strategic plan for 2017-2020.

DBH is excited to lead the implementation of the Children's System of Care strategic plan that was developed with the voice of over 1100 Nebraskans. The system of care is not a program but rather a framework utilizing the power of partnerships. We ground ourselves within the system of care framework that changes the way we plan and conduct business. It involves building state and local collaboration with youth, families and system partners for the purpose of improving access to a coordinated community-based and culturally responsive array of services and supports. Over the last months DBH championed work with public and private partners to build a phased approach for moving the strategic plan to a set of outcomes and activities. We are grateful to the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation who has served as a constant companion, supporter and advocate. Through our public/private partnership, Nebraska will build a system that will make a positive difference in the lives of young people with serious behavioral health challenges and their families. When partners and communities are engaged, Nebraskans will be healthier.

I am proud to serve with a team of incredibly dedicated and talented professionals within the Division, other Divisions, our system partners and most importantly, with individuals who face challenges with mental illness and substance use disorders. We are all eager to tackle the opportunities before us. Success is dependent upon relationships and realizing that the process is a journey, not a destination. It

is imperative that we do what is necessary to remove the stigma and fear associated with mental illness and substance use disorders. We have to get comfortable talking about these illnesses, just as we have talking about physical illnesses.

I approach every day as an opportunity to improve our system to ensure all Nebraskans have the opportunity to reach their full potential. As Director, I will strive to be an effective partner, advisor and leader in system change. I will continue to work towards DHHS's mission of helping people live better lives. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.